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PLAINS INDIAN PAINTING

GEORGE CATLIN AND CARL BODMER
AMONG THE MANDAN, 1832-34

(WITH 12 PLATES)

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During their visits to the Upper Missouri in the years 1832-34 the artists George Catlin and Carl Bodmer created some of the most authentic and best-known pictures of American Indians drawn or painted in the days before the development of photography. Their widely circulated originals and the published reproductions of their pictures have provided millions of viewers in this country and abroad, who never saw a Plains Indian, with a clear, accurate conception of the physical appearance and customs of those Indians as they appeared a century and a quarter ago.

Anthropologists, historians, and art critics have been accustomed to regard these artists as interpreters of Indian culture. Yet there is another point of view from which their contribution may be considered. While among the Indians they demonstrated their skill in handling an alien art style. They were in effect missionaries of the western European artistic tradition. To what extent was their example an influence upon native art? Might they not have been active as innovators in as well as observers of Indian culture?

I believe that data are now available to demonstrate precisely that Catlin's and Bodmer's artistic example *did* influence the development of the painting styles of at least two prominent Mandan Indian artists who had rare opportunities to observe their artistic activity closely while these white artists were recording the native culture of their tribe.

ABORIGINAL MANDAN INDIAN PAINTING

From the time of the first known visit of white men to the Mandan villages in 1738 until the appearance of George Catlin among them

nearly a century later, the Mandan were repeatedly visited by white traders, explorers, and some Government officials. Several traders are known to have lived among these Indians for a number of years during that period. But no one skilled in drawing or painting in the traditional, realistic nineteenth-century style of western European culture is known to have practiced his art in the Mandan villages prior to the visit of George Catlin in the summer of 1832. Mandan Indian painting remained in the aboriginal tradition until that time.

The origin of the Mandan painting tradition is lost in antiquity. La Verendrye, the French explorer-trader, observed, when he was in the Mandan villages on the Missouri in 1738, that these Indians traded painted buffalo robes to neighboring Assiniboin. (La Verendrye, 1890, p. 19.) However, the oldest example of Mandan painting that has been preserved (which is also the earliest dated specimen of the figure painting of any Plains Indian tribe) is a painted buffalo robe collected by the American explorers Lewis and Clark in 1805. This robe is preserved in the collections of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (See pl. 1.) Lewis and Clark included it among the collection of ethnological materials which they sent to President Jefferson from the Mandan villages on April 5, 1805, before they embarked on their overland trek westward to the Pacific. They reported that the paintings on this robe portrayed a battle fought between Mandan warriors and enemy tribesmen about the year 1797. (Lewis and Clark, 1906, vol. 1, pp. 281-288.) So this robe must have been painted within the period 1797-1805.

This is a most interesting example of the aboriginal style of painting employed by men who were the delineators of heroic deeds of the tribe or of individual warriors on the inner surfaces of buffalo robes. The painting comprises a composition of 44 foot warriors and 20 mounted men in combat. Their weapons include 15 trade guns and a pistol in addition to a larger number of native-made offensive and defensive weapons—bows and arrows, lances and shields. All the figures, human and animal, are heavily outlined in a very dark brown, almost a black. Some of the outlined forms are filled in with dark brown, blue green, reddish brown, or yellow.

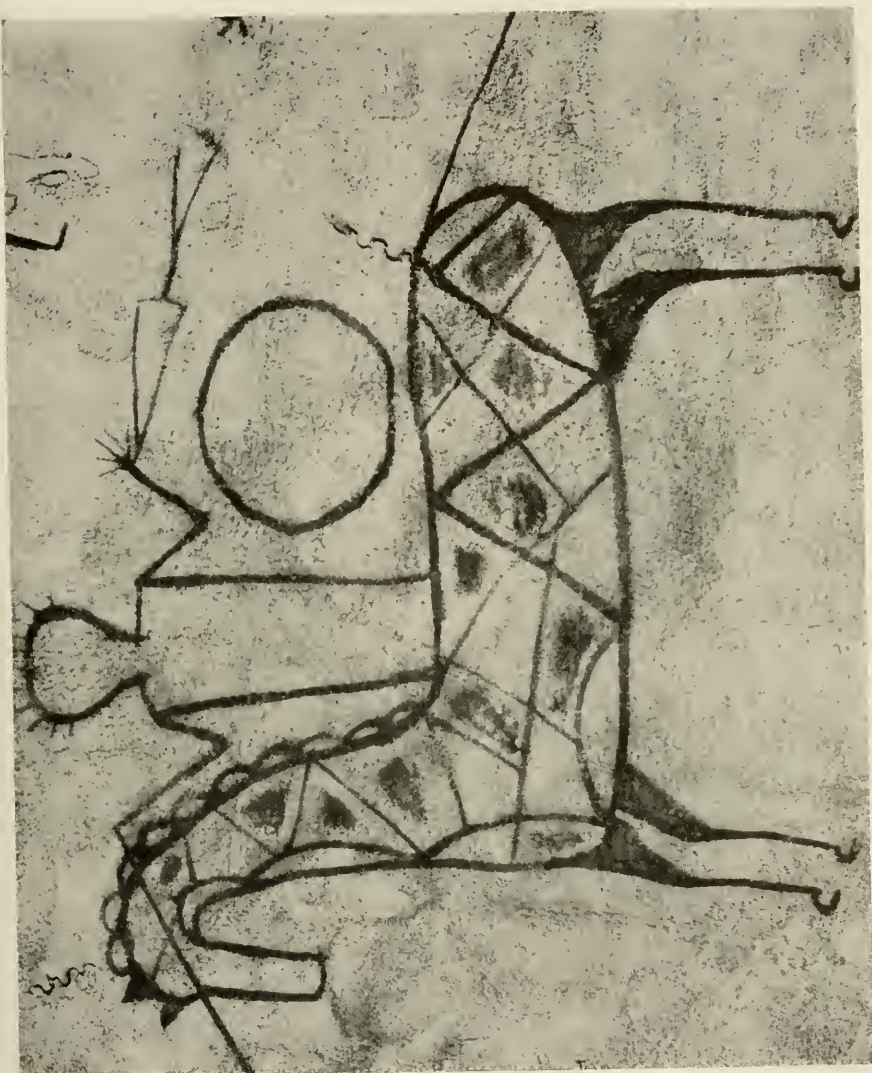
Careful examination of individual figures delineated on this specimen reveals some of the characteristics of the traditional native art style. An enlargement of one of the human figures on this robe (pl. 2), clearly illustrates the characteristic style of human figure in this composition. The head is a featureless, almost circular knob with pendent, conventionalized hair. The neck sits upon a separately



Battle between Mandan Indians and an enemy tribe. Painted buffalo robe collected by Lewis and Clark, 1805.
(Peabody Museum, Harvard University.)



Detail of Mandan robe showing style of painting a foot warrior.
(Peabody Museum, Harvard University.)



Detail of Mandan robe showing style of painting a mounted warrior.
(Peabody Museum, Harvard University.)



1. George Catlin.



2. Carl Bodmer (self-portrait, right) accompanying Prince Maximilian zu Wied.

White artists among the Mandan, 1832-34.

rendered, elongated body which is geometric in character and drawn in outline only. The arms are lines extending outward from the shoulders and bent about midway of their length (i.e., at the elbows). At the ends of these arms are solid ball hands with the five fingers extended as lines. The legs are relatively short, bent at the knees. The grossly shaped upper legs are connected to linear lower legs. The foot is merely a continuation of the line of the lower leg at an angle from it. There is no attempt to portray body clothing. Yet the conventionalized representation of the phallus and scrotum may be an indication that the Mandan and their neighbors wore no breechcloths at that period. Some contemporary descriptions of those Indians also suggest the absence of the breechcloth in the men's costume of the time.

The enlargement of one of the mounted figures painted on this robe (pl. 3) shows the same style of rendering the head, arms, and body of the human figure. Notice that the man does not straddle the horse but merely sits atop it. There is no attempt to render the figure below the waist. The head and body of the horse are drawn in outline. The animal has neither eye nor mouth, but the ears are indicated one above the other and the mane is drawn in a conventionalized manner. The horse's neck and body are decorated in geometric fashion with lines forming angular patterns some of which are partially filled with spots of color. As in the human figures, the upper legs of the horse are thick and the lower ones are mere lines. The hoofs are hook-shaped extensions of the legs.

This primitive Mandan painting accented the general characteristics of the human form—the roundness of the head, the straightness of the limbs, the bilateral symmetry of the body, qualities Rudolf Arnheim has referred to as characteristics of the drawings of both primitives and children. (Arnheim, 1954, p. 131.)

Details of the human figure were unimportant to the primitive Mandan artist. His head remained featureless. Bodies were crudely proportioned and appendages grossly generalized. Although his medium was paint, he used color sparingly. His heavy outlines gave to his work more the character of drawing than painting. He had no knowledge of color modeling or such other sophisticated concepts as foreshortening and perspective. When one object overlapped another he did not try to eliminate the outlines of the more distant one. Note the handling of the quiver carried by the warrior illustrated in plate 2. But generally there was no overlapping of human or animal figures which were scattered over the surface of the robe, each being rendered individually beside, above, or below the others.

Anthropologists customarily refer to this primitive work as picture writing, a term which aptly expresses the major motive for its creation. The painter was more concerned with recording a memorable event by this pictorial shorthand than with the aesthetic appeal of his creation. He was more historian or biographer than artist.

GEORGE CATLIN AMONG THE MANDAN, 1832

George Catlin (pl. 4, fig. 1), spent the summer of 1832 on the Upper Missouri. He traveled upriver on the first steamboat to ascend the Missouri to Fort Union, stopping briefly at Fort Clark, the American Fur Company's post at the Mandan villages. He returned downstream by skiff, stopping over at Fort Clark for a period of two or more weeks. During that period the amazingly energetic Catlin created more than 40 pictures. Half this number were portraits of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Indians in the neighborhood of Fort Clark. The remainder were landscapes.

Catlin was a self-taught artist whose forte was portraiture. He possessed a remarkable ability to catch a likeness of his sitter with a few swift, bold strokes of his pencil or brush. Catlin's own account of his journey repeatedly referred to the Indians' delight and amazement at his ability to transfer their faces to canvas. They had seen nothing like this realistic portraiture before. (Catlin, 1841, vol. 1.)

Catlin was less skilled in rendering the human body. His interest in the details of Indian costume and ornament usually was secondary to his keen desire to record faithfully the heads and faces of his subjects. Not infrequently, he exaggerated or omitted important details of dress. (Ewers, 1956, pp. 495-498). Nevertheless, Catlin's very practice of painting from a model may have been a novelty in method of rendering the human figure that impressed some of his Indian sitters who had been familiar only with the generalized representations of humans created by native picture writers.

CARL BODMER AMONG THE MANDAN, 1833-34

Carl Bodmer, on the other hand, was a meticulous draughtsman thoroughly trained in the best European traditions of drawing from the model. The German scientist Prince Maximilian zu Wied carefully picked young, Swiss-born Bodmer (he was only in his early twenties) to accompany him on his travels in America for the purpose of making drawings that would illustrate his own scientific observations. The exacting scientist expected his artist's record to be no less accurate in every detail than would be his own writings.



1. Portrait by Catlin, 1832.

Four Bears, Mandan second chief and artist.



2. Portrait by Bodmer, 1834.



Detail of paintings on front of Four Bears' shirt, collected by George Catlin in 1832.

The Prince and the artist ascended the Missouri on an American Fur Company steamer in 1833. (See Bodmer's own field portraits of himself and the Prince, pl. 4, fig. 2.) They met some of the Mandan briefly on their way upriver in June. In the fall of that year, after more than a month of observation and picturemaking among the Blackfoot near Fort McKenzie, they returned to Fort Clark. There they spent the winter from November 8, 1833, to April 18, 1834, a period of more than five months. James Kipp, the fur company's manager of Fort Clark, provided the German nobleman and his artist associate with a whitewashed room in a newly built wooden building within the fort which served them as living quarters, studio, and workroom. Throughout their stay, Bodmer worked assiduously drawing and painting the likenesses of Mandan and other neighboring Indians in his studio, and scenes in the nearby Indian villages. He worked slowly and methodically, sometimes taking a full day or longer to complete a single portrait or view. During this period he created some of the most exact, realistic pictures of American Indians ever executed. These pictures possess a remarkable sharpness and depth of focus. Not only are the faces of the Indians truthful likenesses, but the minute details of costume and ornament are precisely delineated.

Although Catlin introduced realistic portraiture to the Mandan, the superior draughtsman, Carl Bodmer, showed them how every detail of a picture could be rendered with absolute truthfulness. Bodmer was the missionary par excellence of the white man's tradition of realism in art.

Nor was Bodmer content merely to exhibit his own work among the Indians. He furnished some of them with paper and watercolors, and encouraged them to make pictures for him and for Prince Maximilian. In the collections belonging to the estate of Prince Maximilian zu Wied are no less than nine original Indian drawings on paper, collected during Maximilian and Bodmer's trip to the Upper Missouri in 1833-34.

THE CHANGING ART STYLE OF FOUR BEARS, MANDAN CHIEF

Both Catlin and Prince Maximilian considered Four Bears the most remarkable man in the Mandan tribe. Although he held the rank of second chief, he was his people's most popular leader. He was the son of a prominent warrior, Handsome Child. Four Bears himself, though of slight build and medium stature, claimed to have killed 5 enemy chiefs and to have taken 14 scalps. Upon his return

from a coup-counting session in the Mandan village of Ruhptare in January 1834, Four Bears told his white friends "with great satisfaction and self-complacency, that he had enumerated all his exploits, and that no one had been able to surpass him." (Maximilian, 1906, vol. 24, p. 58.)

Four Bears also was a leader in Mandan ceremonies. Prince Maximilian saw him lead a dance of the Dog Society, and learned that he had been selected as director of the great tribal religious festival, the Okipa, to be held the following summer (1834).

Four Bears' services to the traders and to visiting whites were many. Mr. Kipp relied upon him to protect the trading post at Fort Clark from the petty thievery of Mandan women and children. Maximilian found him to be his best authority on the language and religion of the Arikara, a tribe the scientist had no opportunity to visit. He observed that Four Bears spoke Arikara "fluently" (Maximilian, 1906, vol. 24, p. 73).

The active, versatile Four Bears was also an artist. This handsome, stout-hearted, friendly Mandan leader completely captivated George Catlin as did no other Indian among the more than 40 tribes Catlin visited. Catlin devoted a full chapter of his book to this warrior's exploits and frequently referred to him elsewhere. He painted two portraits of Four Bears (his Mah-to-toh-pa), both of which are preserved in the collections of the U. S. National Museum (Nos. 386128 and 386131). One portrait shows Four Bears in mourning, bare to the waist, with scars on his breast, arms, and legs evidencing his past submission to the excruciating self-torture of the Okipa. The other (see pl. 5, fig. 1), painted in a day-long session, presents Four Bears at full length in his finest dress costume. Catlin collected this costume and displayed it for many years in his traveling exhibition. The handsomely quilled and painted shirt is preserved in the U. S. National Museum (No. 386505). This shirt provides excellent examples of the art style Four Bears employed in depicting his war exploits in 1832 or earlier. On the right side of the shirt front he simply recorded his victims by painting their heads and upper bodies (pl. 6). On the back of the shirt he portrayed one of his coups (pl. 7). Note the very close similarity of this style to that of the painting on the buffalo robe collected by Lewis and Clark a quarter century earlier. Except for the crude representation of the features (two marks for eyes and one for the mouth), the rendering of the human figure is almost identical. It is definitely in the tradition of aboriginal Mandan picture writing.

Shortly before Catlin left the Mandan, Four Bears invited him to a feast in his earth lodge and presented him with a robe bearing a representation of his most important coups. The chief had spent two weeks painting this robe during Catlin's residence in the village. Unfortunately, the original of this robe is lost, and Catlin's copy of the specimen, reproduced in his book and in one of his paintings in the American Museum of Natural History (pl. 8), appears to be an untrustworthy interpretation of the Indian artist's style. Catlin adopted conventions of his own for rapidly rendering his copies of Indian pictographs. They appear to be more Catlin than Indian in style. Yet there is one detail in these paintings that Catlin surely did not invent—the hooklike hoofs of the horses, just like the horse hoofs portrayed by the unnamed Mandan artist prior to 1805. (See pl. 3.)

Prince Maximilian and Bodmer came to know Four Bears (their Mato-Topé) even better than had Catlin. They first met him at Fort Clark in June 1833, on their way upriver, and the Prince bought from him "his painted buffalo dress," suggesting that the clever Indian was adept in dealing with white collectors. On their return to Fort Clark in November, Four Bears came to visit them in their studio. Prince Maximilian's journal tells of his repeated visits to his quarters during their long stay at Fort Clark. Sometimes he spent the night on the floor before their fire. Four Bears exhibited an unusual interest in Bodmer's art. He brought other Indians to the studio to be painted and remained to watch the proceedings. He himself posed for two portraits by the Swiss artist, one of which is reproduced as plate 5, figure 2. (The other, a full-length view in dress costume, is published as plate 46, in Maximilian's *Atlas*). He also prevailed upon Bodmer to paint for him a white-headed eagle holding a bloody scalp in his claws. In return Four Bears painted for Maximilian a representation of his principal coups on a buffalo robe, and a separate rendering of one of his exploits, the conquest of a Cheyenne chief in hand-to-hand combat, apparently executed on paper. Although I have not been able to locate the originals of these works, they undoubtedly are reproduced with fidelity in Maximilian's *Atlas*, plates 51 and 55. I include them here as plates 9 and 10. Comparison of the style of painting illustrated by the picture on plate 10 with that of the painting on Four Bears' shirt (pls. 6 and 7), clearly reveals the great change in this Mandan artist's style that took place during the period 1832-34. Gone were the knoblike heads, the stick figures, the crude proportions, the lack of detail. Heads were now painted in profile, the features sharply defined. Great care was taken in drawing a realistic human eye. The arms, legs, and

bodies were well proportioned, and the details of headgear, ornaments, and body costume, and the moccasined feet were delineated with painstaking care. Even though the colors of the original drawing are not known, some attempt at color modeling is suggested on the face and upper body of the warrior on the right. Can there be any doubt that this marked change in the painting style of Four Bears in the direction of a much more realistic treatment of the human figure should be attributed to the example of the white artists George Catlin and Carl Bodmer, whose artistic methods Four Bears had observed closely over a total period of several months?

INFLUENCE UPON THE ART STYLE OF YELLOW FEATHER

Next to Four Bears, the most frequent Mandan Indian visitor to Bodmer's studio at Fort Clark during the winter of 1833-34 was a young warrior named Sih-Chida, The Yellow Feather. He was the son of a deceased Mandan head chief. Yellow Feather proudly showed Maximilian the Indians' copy of the first treaty between his tribe and the United States, signed by his father and General Atkinson in the year 1825.

Bodmer executed a full-length portrait of Yellow Feather in December 1833 (plate 11, fig. 2, man on the left). Almost certainly this young man also posed for Catlin a year and a half earlier, although Catlin rendered his name "Seehk-hee-da, the Mouse-coloured Feather." (See pl. 11, fig. 1.) Not only are the facial features of the Bodmer and Catlin portraits similar but the sitter wears a pair of long pendants of dentalia and large trade beads which appear to be identical.

Maximilian wrote, "Sih-Chida, a tall, stout young man, the son of a celebrated chief now dead, was an Indian who might be depended on, who became one of our best friends and visited us almost daily. He was very polished in his manners, and possessed more delicacy of feeling than most of his countrymen. He never importuned us by asking for anything; as soon as dinner was served he withdrew, though he was not rich, and did not even possess a horse. He came almost every evening, when his favorite employment was drawing, for which he had some talent, though his figures were no better than those drawn by our children." (Maximilian, 1906, vol. 24, pp. 15-16.)

Yellow Feather spent several nights in Maximilian's quarters, sleeping on the ground before the fire. On one occasion he recovered Maximilian's thermometer which he found concealed under the robe



Detail of paintings on back of Four Bears' shirt, collected by George Catlin in 1832.



Catlin's facsimile of Four Bears' painted robe. (American Museum of Natural History.)

of a woman who had stolen it. On April 10, Yellow Feather left to join a large Hidatsa and Mandan war party against an enemy tribe. But sometime before his leavetaking, Yellow Feather painted at least two pictures in watercolors on paper for the Prince's collection. One of these I here reproduce as plate 12, with the very kind permission of Karl Viktor Prince zu Wied. The style of painting the human and animal figures exhibited by this picture, though crude, is a far cry from the simple figures of traditional Mandan picture writing. The rider sits astride his horse rather than on top of it. His face is shown in profile and considerable emphasis is given to a realistic representation of the human eye. The eye of the horse, both the white and the ball, are shown with an equal concern for detail. The ears, nostril, and mouth are delineated. There is some grace in the entire horse figure. The hoofs are realistically formed in contrast to the hooklike conventionalized hoofs of traditional Mandan pictography. The figures have some degree of roundness achieved by elementary color modeling which is less apparent in the photographic reproduction than in the full-colored original. Although we have no earlier example of Yellow Feather's art with which to compare this painting, I believe the influence of the white artists Catlin and Bodmer is reflected in this example of the effort of a young Mandan artist to portray details and to achieve realism in his figure painting.

CONCLUSIONS

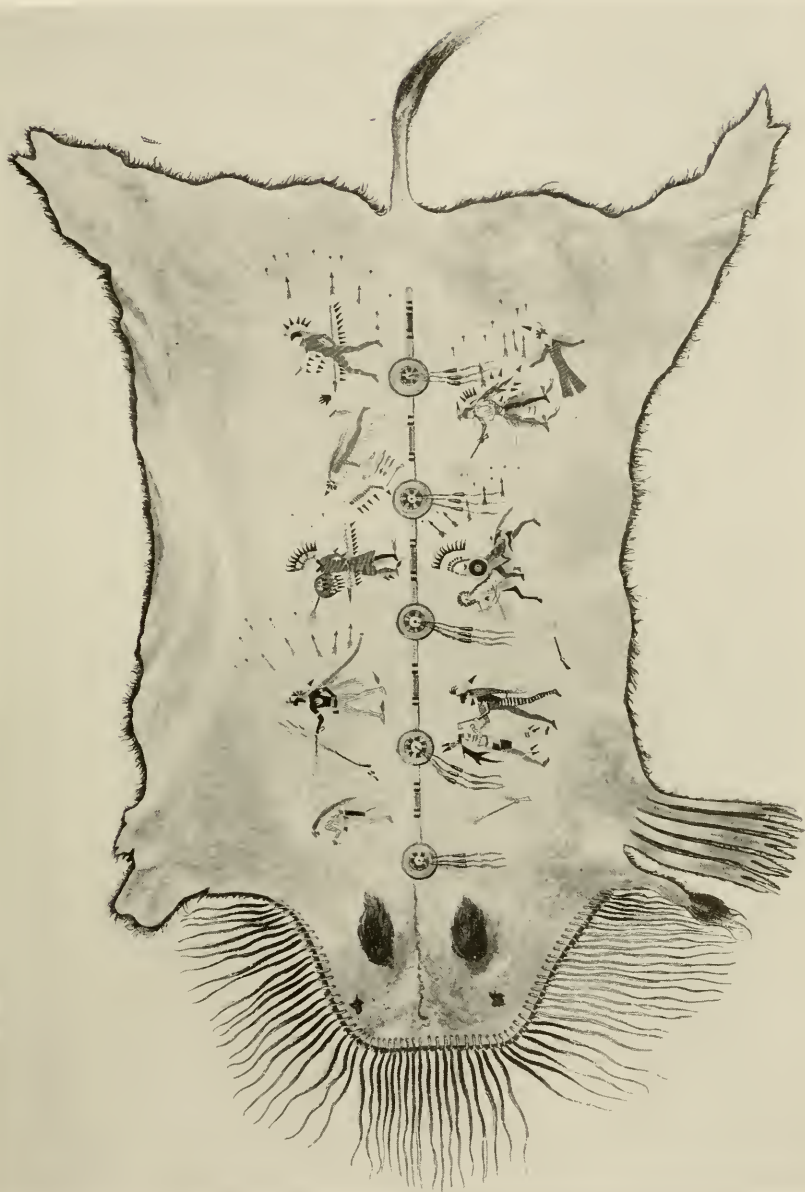
The foregoing data provide perhaps the best documented case history of the influence of the European artistic tradition of realism upon the painting style of primitive American Indian artists of a century and a quarter ago. The details of this documentation are indeed remarkable. We know the characteristics of traditional Mandan Indian picture writing as it was practiced prior to and at the time of these Indians' introduction to the European art tradition. We know who the missionaries of the European tradition were (George Catlin and Carl Bodmer), and when they were active among the Mandan (1832-34). We know that these white men demonstrated the objectives and methods of realistic drawing and painting to the Mandan, and that they actively encouraged the efforts of native artists. We know who two of those artists were (Four Bears and Yellow Feather). We know that these Indians posed for both white artists a total of six times and that they watched the white men paint numerous portraits of other Indians. We have examples of the painting of one native artist prior to the visits of Catlin and Bodmer,

and examples of the work of both artists, executed before Bodmer departed from Fort Clark, which clearly reveal the influence of European realism upon their painting styles.

It is not possible or necessary to distinguish the separate influences of Catlin and Bodmer upon the work of these artists. Probably the cumulative effect of the examples and encouragement of two white artists, who visited the Mandan within a period of a little over a year, was important in impressing upon the native artists' minds the possibilities of realistic representation of men and horses which found expression in their own later work.

Significant, too, were the character and position of the two Indian artists who fell under the spell of the white artists' realism. Both Four Bears and Yellow Feather were sons of prominent men in their tribe. They were not idle dreamers but active warriors, versatile, gregarious fellows. Certainly Four Bears was a decided extrovert, who numbered painting among his many interests and accomplishments. He was the antithesis of the American artist James A. McNeill Whistler's conception of the primitive artist as a "man who took no joy in the ways of his brethren, who cared not for conquest, and fretted in the field—this designer of quaint patterns—this devisor of the beautiful—who perceived in Nature about curious curvings, as faces are seen in the fire—this dreamer apart, was the first artist." (Whistler, 1916, p. 8.) Rather, the example of Four Bears would suggest that the artist in a primitive hunting culture was more apt to have been an active hunter and warrior, a fierce competitor, a wide-awake, keen participant in the affairs of his tribe, who enjoyed picturing the most exciting, heroic, and memorable of his rich experiences.

There remains the problem of the relative permanence of Catlin's and Bodmer's influence upon Mandan Indian art. This is difficult to answer. Examples of Mandan painting in the late 1830's and the 1840's are lacking. Unfortunately, neither Four Bears nor Yellow Feather long survived Bodmer's sojourn among the Mandan. Catlin claimed that "Sehk-hee-da was killed by the Sioux, and scalped, two years after I painted his portrait." (Catlin, 1848, p. 19.) The journal of Francois Chardon, who succeeded Kipp in charge of Fort Clark, repeatedly mentioned Four Bears' activity as a warrior during the middle '30s, but said nothing of his artistic endeavors. In the summer of 1837 a disastrous smallpox epidemic decimated the Mandan tribe. Late in July of that year, Four Bears contracted that dread disease. He died a few days later. But before his death this courageous leader delivered a speech to his people denouncing the whites as



Bodmer's facsimile of Four Bears' painted robe. (Maximilian's *Atlas*.)



Facsimile of Four Bears' painting of his victory over a Cheyenne chief. (Maximilian's *Atlas*.)



1. Portrait by Catlin, 1832.

Yellow Feather, artist and son of Mandan head chief.



2. Portrait by Bodmer, 1833. (Yellow Feather at left.)



Reproduction of a watercolor by Yellow Feather. Original owned by the Estate of Prince Maximilian zu Wied.

black-hearted dogs who had repaid his long and faithful friendship with a pestilence which was causing him to "die with my face rotten, that even the wolves will shrink with horror at seeing me." Chardon wrote Four Bears' brief obituary in his journal under the date Sunday, July 30, 1837: "One of our best friends of the Village (Four Bears), died today, regretted by all who knew him." (Chardon, 1932, pp. 44-45, 50, 123-125.)

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